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AUTHOR Dorr, Aimee
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ABSTRACT

Most educators argue that the time children spend watching television detracts from their homework time and leisure time reading, that television watching cultivates skills different from those needed for print literacy and encourages preference for its easier means of acquiring information, and that television content is often nonintellectual and even antiintellectual. Numerous studies give little indication that activities that seem crucial to the development of reading changed dramatically with the introduction of television into towns that previously had none. Other studies suggest slight declines in reading and academic achievement among brighter students in such towns. No analysis has argued that television information processing skills are antithetical to those required for reading, nor are there data indicating that those who consider television less demanding than reading actually prefer it. There is evidence, however, suggesting (1) that leisure time viewing of television can promote the development of vocabulary and other information processing skills, as well as the understanding of plotline and characterization; and (2) that dramatization of books on television can motivate reading activity. It is apparent that when television is used deliberately to develop print literacy it can do so. (HTH)

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READING IN THE AGE OF TELEVISION

AIMEE DORR

Our educational institutions aim, among other goals, to teach students to communicate. It is intended that they be able both to send and to receive information, ideas, opinions, emotions, and entertainment. Such activities are to be conducted in intelligent, accurate, and effective ways. When they are, students are able to participate fully in civil, political, occupational, community, and personal life. Our efforts at achieving this goal are directed almost entirely at print literacy, as any look at school districts' curricula or at time allocation in their classrooms will readily demonstrate. The emphasis is on teaching students to read and write and to do them well.

Virtually no emphasis is given to teaching children to use another means of communication--television, even though children now live in the age of television. As a medium, television pervades American life. It is heavily used to gain information, access ideas, learn about social mores, participate in political life, join in worship, keep abreast of the news, and form a community. Surely it is a medium about which one should be literate. Just as surely such literacy should not come at the expense of achieving traditional print literacy. Some educators fear just this. They argue that television has already caused declines in children's achievement of print literacy. Why increase this effect, they ask, by actually giving school time to the culprit? The bases for this argument will be explored in the next section, after which there will be an examination of the positive contributions television may make to the development of print literacy. Finally, it will be urged that literacy goals in school be broadened to include television as well as print.

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Television as Hindrance

Most educators view televison as a problem. They recognize the many hours most children spend watching it. They argue that this must surely mean less time given to homework and to leisure time reading. Alternatively, they compare the information processing requirements of television and print and argue that television viewing cultivates skills different from those needed for reading. It is deemed to encourage preferences for its easier means of aquiring information, entertaining style, quick pace, and quick provision of gratifications. Finally, educators point to televison's general reliance on non-intellectual--even anti-intellectual--content. Schools, scholarship, and intelligence, when they are present at all, are likely to be made fun of, not to be admired. Surely, they argue, this encourages negative attitudes among students. The commonsense and everyday experiential bases for these claims are evident. Is there also a scientific base to support them?

Since television was first introduced in the 1950's, scholars have been interested in how people's activities changed to permit time for television viewing. Evidence exists from numerous studies comparing towns before and after the introduction of television or comparing similar towns with and without televison (1). How did children's activities usually change? They went to bed 10-15 minutes later each night, spent a few less minutes each day doing homework, read few comics, went to many fewer movies, listened to the radio much less, spent a little less time in unstructured outdoor play, read just as many books and talked with their parents more. There is little indication here that activities which seem crucially important to the development of reading changed dramatically. If this is true for comparisons of

children with and without television, then one would expect to find weak relationships between the amount of time spent viewing television and children's reading achievement. There are now several studies which have assessed this relationship, as well as several which have examined other aspects of academic achievement in relationship to television viewing time (2,3). Altogether they suggest that extensive viewing is related to slight declines in reading, and other academic, achievement. The effect seems to be most pronounced among brighter students. Light viewing as opposed to little or no viewing, especially by less bright students, may even be associated with improved reading performance.

There is little scholarly evidence addressing the remainder of educators' worries about television's effects on print literacy. There have been demonstrations that television can be used to cultivate certain information processing skills (4), but no analysis has argued that these skills are antithetical to those required for reading. One study explored the extent to which programming like Sesame Street made it difficult for preschoolers to concentrate, delay gratification, and the like (5). No such effects were found. There is some as yet unpublished evidence that people consider television viewing a less demanding activity than reading, but this does not prove that they therefore prefer it. On this latter point there are virtually no data. Finally, there is some evidence that schools and teachers are not usually presented on television in the most appealing light (6), but this does not prove that children take such television messages more seriously than they do their own experiences with schooling. On this latter point there are also virtually no data.

Scholarly work thus provides support for some of educators' concerns, while not addressing others of them. At its strongest, the work suggests

that television viewing can detract from the development of print literacy. At the same time, it suggests that television's contribution--or lack of it--is small. If we really want to wory about reading, we need to look at several factors besides television, most especially what goes on in school. We may even want to look to television to assist us there.

Television as Help

Some educators have sought to harness television's potential contributions to achieving print literacy, both in the schools and at home. They recognize the ability of the medium intentionally to teach some aspects of reading. They know that interest in the medium can be used to motivate reading activities and that a televised dramatization of a story can make children and adults want to read the book. They even suggest that leisure-time viewing of usual television fare could promote the development of such components of reading skill as vocabulary, understanding of plotline and characterization, and other information processing skills. What scholarly support is there for these more positive views of television's impact on print literacy?

One of the early visions for television was that of savior of our schools (7). Master teachers would be found and, via television, be made available to every student in the nation. The vision has clearly not been realized. Not every school even yet has one operating television receiver (8). Masterful teaching by television is every bit as difficult to achieve as it is face-to-face, and consistently masterful teaching is every bit as impossible. Television is now recognized to be at its best as an aid to the classroom teacher (7). In that capacity several series have been developed to teach various reading skills.

Some teach decoding, phonics, sight reading, punctuation, and simple vocabulary, obviously elementary skills. Others teach advanced vocabulary and the elements of style. Others introduce great literature and literary styles. Every evaluation which has been conducted of such series indicates that viewing contributes to the development of the targeted reading skills (9).

There is also evidence that television can motivate reading activities. Dramatization of a book on television recurrently leads to increases in purchasing the book or borrowing it from the library. This includes the primetime serialization of modern novels, the occasional CBS reading specials such as The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, and the review of children's classics in Saturday morning network children's programs. Children's general interest in television can also be used to motivate them to read. By now the experiences of the Philadelphia school teacher who had children eagerly reading television scripts are well known (10). Perhaps with some exaggeration, he happily reported that the scripts were the first reading material ever stolen from the school. Others have successfully copied this experiment, as well as devised other clever ways to use interest in television to motivate reading and writing.

Although we have little evidence either way right now, one can conceive of ways in which leisure-time viewing of usual television fare could contribute to print literacy. It may increase a child's vocabulary, which then contributes to reading skill. Some studies have shown such an increase, especially among younger viewers (3). It may also help children to learn the rudiments of plotlines, characterization, motivation of action, and the like--the basics of narration which are shared by television drama and literature alike. Finally, it gives children

repeated practice in attributing meaning to content, once that content has been decoded, which is an essential activity in reading.

It is apparent that when television is used deliberately to develop print literacy it can do so. Viewed then as a means of instruction, television succeeds in helping children to learn to read well and in motivating them to do so. Viewed simply as a means of entertainment, television may contribute only a little to reading achievement. In addition, as noted in the preceding section, viewing many hours of it each day may actually hinder the development of print literacy. Both these conclusions reflect a view of television as a means of instruction or non-instruction. Neither makes television itself a focus of instruction. Yet, in this age of television, perhaps that is exactly what should be done.

Television as Focus

This paper began by recognizing that a major educational goal is to teach students to communicate. At one time this goal was recognized in instruction in elocution, rhetoric, and public speaking. Scholars put rocks in their mouths and perorated. Students chanted, recited, sang, and spoke. Such goals and methods were appropriate when speech was most often relied upon to inform people, to persuade them, to move them. But then the world changed. Printed materials became easy to produce and mass distribute. Newspapers gave us the news of the day, politics, and business. Letters could go anywhere relatively quickly. Books and worksheets became the major media of instruction. To be able to read and write became crucial skills for every citizen. Our schools appropriately focussed more and more on this one means of communication.

But the world has changed again. Television is now the major source of news, the major medium used by politicians, and a major force in our consumer economy. It is a significant source of information, attitudes, and behavioral models for all aspects of life. Not far behind it is the computer. More and more the computer figures in recordkeeping, planning and forecasting, bibliographic storage and retrieval, mail and messaging systems, and even games. The miniaturization of computer components promises to bring computers into the daily lives of more and more people.

With such technological changes having occurred and promising to occur, the properly educated child of today and adult of tomorrow needs to be literate in these technologies as well as in speaking, listening, writing, and reading. Right now, the literacy focus can legitimately be enlarged to include television. It is the medium of the day and promises to be that for some time to come. But a good preparation for the future ought also to include computers.

What it means to be literate differs for the technologies of face-to-face interchange, print, television, and computers. Decoding and encoding problems and demands vary, interpretative problems differ, and the ease with which one can critically evaluate content may vary. But all this means is that the roads to literacy differ among the technologies. The goal itself cannot differ if we educators are to take seriously our responsibility to prepare students to participate fully in all aspects of modern adult life. Reading in the age of television ought to mean "reading television" and maybe computers as well as reading print.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Aimee Dorr is Professor of Education at the University of California at Los Angeles. Her research centers on the ways in which children use television, make sense of it, and are affected by it. She finds opportunity to apply her findings in consultation with various television production and broadcasting groups.